

USDA/Rural Development

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Editorial by Thomas C. Dorr, Under Secretary for Rural Development

National American Indian Heritage Month

In proclaiming November as National American Indian Heritage Month, President Bush has expressed the collective gratitude of the American people to Native Americans and Alaska Natives. At USDA Rural Development, we embrace the President's message of appreciation and are committed to strengthening existing working relationships with all tribal communities to help improve the quality of life for rural tribal residents.

Since the creation in 1992, of a formalized policy for working with American Indians and Alaska Natives, USDA has been the lead Federal agency for providing effective and efficient coordination of agricultural and rural development programs. USDA Rural Development is uniquely prepared to accomplish this task through a multitude of tools that can assist with economic and community development, including: financial and technical assistance related to community infrastructure (electric, telecommunications, water, and wastewater); single and multi-family housing; and business and industry development. In 2001 alone, \$177 million was provided to tribal communities to address local needs.

I firmly believe that one of the most effective ways to foster economic and community growth is to share knowledge and resources that will develop a holistic approach to community issues. To support this idea, training was provided in September of 2002 to USDA Rural Development employees responsible for working with Federal and state recognized tribal communities. This training focused on outreach, communications, and program delivery. Central to USDA Rural Development's mission is to be an active participant in the American Indian community, as well as a partner with the other agencies and organizations that support the development and well-being of tribal communities.

At USDA we've become an active participant with organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians, the National American Indian Housing Council, the Housing Assistance Council, Federal Reserve Bank, and others. And as a result of such partnership building, we have joined in a very unique initiative entitled, "One Stop Mortgage Lending in Indian Country." This initiative is an interagency effort with all of the federal agencies that provide housing assistance. The goal is simply to improve customer service.

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Several significant efforts are underway to work in unison with tribal communities to improve the overall quality of life of their residents. For instance, Rural Development has signed an agreement with Indian Health Services to develop water and wastewater infrastructure on Indian lands; provided a \$700,000 grant to the Walking Shield American Indian Society to support “nation building”, an exciting concept focused on creating new communities that can serve as an example of how such partnerships can work together, to address community needs; and most recently, I announced in October a five star commitment by Rural Development’s Housing Service to help achieve President Bush’s goal of increasing rural minority homeownership. This five star commitment will lower financing and refinancing fees, double the number of self-help housing participants, increase participation of minority lenders through outreach, promote credit counseling and homeownership education, and monitor lending activities to ensure a ten percent increase in minority homeownership. These examples are a few of the many ongoing efforts by USDA Rural Development to share financial and technical resources that will help support President Bush’s economic agenda for all Americans.

National American Indian Heritage Month allows us to give thanks as we reflect on the past, and prepare for the future. As Under Secretary for Rural Development, I pledge my support and that of our offices throughout the country, to assist American Indians and Alaska Natives obtain greater economic security and to work in partnership with tribal communities to improve the quality of life of rural tribal residents.

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